

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
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P R 161215Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6796
INFO AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
AMEMBSSY KINGSTON
AMEMBSSY LONDON
AMEMBASY PARAMARIBO
AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN
AMEMBSSY BRASILIA
AMEMBASSY CARACAS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 GEORGETOWN 1560

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PDIP, PEPR, GY
SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER BURNHAM'S PRESS CONFERENCE-
CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

1. SUMMARY: IN AN OBVIOUS EFFORT TO COUNTER GROWING CRITICISM
OF HIS PROPOSAL FOR A REFERENDUM TO EFFECT CONSTITUTIONAL
CHANGE IN GUYANA, PRIMIN BURNHAM DEALT AT LENGTH WITH THE
SUBJECT AT HIS PRESS CONFERENCE SATURDAY, MAY 13. HE HAD
JUST RETURNED FIVE DAYS PREVIOUSLY FROM A 28-DAY FOUR-NATION
TOUR WHICH HAD TAKEN HIM TO MOSCOW, NORTH KOREA, EAST
GERMANY AND THE UK. PRINCIPAL FOCUS OF THE PRESS CONFERENCE
WAS TO EXPLAIN ACCOMPLISHMENTS ACHIEVED IN THE INTERNATIONAL
TOUR. HOWEVER, IMPORTANT SECTIONS OF HIS OPENING STATEMENT
AS WELL AS IN THE QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD WERE DEVOTED
TO THE FORTHCOMING CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM. PRINCIPAL
NEW FEATURE ANNOUNCED BY BURNHAM WAS PROPOSAL THAT
PARLIAMENT BE CONVERTED INTO A CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY
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FOLLOWING THE SUCCESSFUL PASSAGE OF THE REFERENDUM PRO-
POSAL, THAT INTERESTED GROUPS SUCH AS TRADES UNION
CONGRESS (TUC), COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AND CERTAIN OTHERS,
BECOME "PERMANENT ADVISORS" TO THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY,
AND THAT ALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS WILL BE HEARD BY THE
CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY AS IT PREPARES DRAFT OF NEW
CONSTITUTION. PRESS CONFERENCE WAS FIRST COHERENT GOG

RESPONSE TO GROWING CHORUS OF CRITICISM AIMED AT THE
CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM. END SUMMARY.

2. IN A PRESS CONFERENCE MAY 13 PRIMIN FORBES BURNHAM
REPORTED TO THE NATION ON HIS RECENTLY CONCLUDED FOUR-
NATION TOUR OF THE SOVIET UNION, NORTH KOREA, EAST
GERMANY AND THE UK. HE ALSO TOOK THE OPPORTUNITY TO MODIFY
HIS GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSAL FOR A CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM
WHICH, IF APPROVED, WOULD ENABLE THE PNC-CONTROLLED
PARLIAMENT TO MODIFY THE EXISTING CONSTITUTION OF GUYANA
IN WHOLE OR PART WITHOUT FURTHER REFERENCE TO THE
ELECTORATE. BURNHAM SAID THAT WHAT HE HAD IN MIND NOW,
ASSUMING THE APPROVAL OF THE REFERENDUM BY THE ELECTORATE,
WAS THE TEMPORARY TRANSFORMATION OF THE EXISTING PARLIAMENT
INTO A CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY. HE WOULD BE PROPOSING, HE
SAID, TO THE OPPOSITION THAT SUCH ORGANIZATIONS AS THE
TRADES UNION CONGRESS AND THE COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, AS
WELL AS SOME OTHERS, BE INVITED TO BECOME "PERMANENT
ADVISORS" TO THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY. A DRAFT CONSTI-
TUTION WAS IN PREPARATION BY THE ULING PEOPLES NATIONAL
CONGRESS (PNC) WHICH WOULD PROVIDE FOR AN EXECUTIVE
PRESIDENT AND WOULD ENSURE CERTAIN RIGHTS TO THE PEOPLE
SUCH AS THE RIGHT TO WORK, THE RIGHT TO LEISURE, THE
RIGHT TO MEDICAL TREATMENT AND EDUCATION. BOTH IN HIS
OPENING REMARKS AND IN HIS RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS, BURNHAM
WAS DISDAINFUL OF THE OPPOSITION WHICH HAD FORMED IN THE
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WAKE OF HIS GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSAL FOR A CONSTITUTIONAL
REFERENDUM. AT FREQUENT INTERVALS HE REMINDED THE
ASSEMBLAGE THAT THE OPPOSITION PEOPLES PROGRESSIVE PARTY
(LED BY CHEDDI JAGAN THEN AS NOW) HAD REFUSED IN THE
LATE 1950S AND EARLY 1960S WHEN IT HAD POLITICAL CONTROL
OF THE GOVERNMENT TO ACCEPT THE PROPOSAL THAT OTHER
ELEMENTS SHOULD BE PERMITTED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE
DRAFTING OF THE CONSTITUTION WHICH WOULD BE THE FUNDA-
MENTAL LAW OF GUYANA AFTER INDEPENDENCE. HE CONTRASTED
THAT POSITION WITH HIS HOW PARTY'S WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN
TO CONTRARY VIEWS IN A CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY. AT ONE
POINT WHEN A REPORTER ASKED IF HE (BURNHAM) WERE STILL
WILLING TO MEET WITH DR. JAGAN DESPITE THE LATTER'S
WALKOUT DURING THE VOTE ON THE CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM,
BURNHAM REPLIED WITH A THEATRICAL SIGH THAT, "THE DUTIES
OF A PRIME MINISTER TRANSCEND THE PETTINESS OF
OPPOSITION GROUPS."

3. BURNHAM WAS UNCLEAR ON THE MECHANICS AS TO JUST HOW,
LEGALLY, THE EXISTING PARLIAMENT (WHOSE MANDATE EXPIRES
ON JULY 24) COULD BE CONVERTED INTO A CONSTITUENT ASSEM-
BLY AND CONTINUE TO FUNCTION BEYOND THE EXPIRY OF ITS

FIVE-YEAR TERM. PRESUMABLY ONCE THE CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM HAS BEEN APPROVED AND ALL OF THE ARTICLES OF THE EXISTING CONSTITUTION BECOME ELIGIBLE FOR MODIFICATION OR REPEAL BY A SIMPLE TWO-THIRDS VOTE OF PARLIAMENT, THIS LEGAL IMPEDIMENT CAN BE DEALT WITH. EQUALLY UNCLEAR WAS THE PROCEDURE WHEREBY THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY WOULD BE RECONVERTED ONCE MORE, AFTER IS DRAFTING CHORES HAD BEEN CONCLUDED, INTO A PARLIAMENT FOR THE PURPOSE OF APPROVING ITS OWN HANDIWORK.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 GEORGETOWN 1560

4. THE PRIME MINISTER WAS FAIRLY SPECIFIC, HOWEVER, IN DESCRIBING THE ROLE OF THE "EXECUTIVE PRESIDENT" WHICH HE SAID WOULD BE PROVIDED FOR IN THE PNC'S DRAFT CONSTITUTION NOW IN PREPARATION. A TRUE PRESIDENTIAL EXECUTIVE AS IN "THE UNITED STATES, FRANCE, NORTH KOREA OR TANZANIA," HE WOULD BE THE INDIVIDUAL HEADING THE PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION LIST OF THE MAJORITY PARTY. (PARLIAMENTARY MEMBERSHIP IN GUYANA IS DRAWN FROM PARTY LISTS UNDER A SYSTEM OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION.) ASKED IF HE EXPECTED TO BE THE FIRST EXECUTIVE PRESIDENT OF GUYANA UNDER A NEW CONSTITUTION, BURNHAM MODESTLY REPLIED, "I DON'T KNOW; IT DEPENDS UPON WHETHER MY PARTY MAKES ME THE HEAD OF THE LIST."

5. BURNHAM REITERATED IN HIS REMARKS AND RESPONSES TO

QUESTIONS THE GOVERNMENT'S PREVIOUSLY-STATED REASON FOR
PUSHING FOR THE ADOPTION OF A NEW CONSTITUTION AT THIS
TIME: IT WAS NECESSARY BECAUSE THE EXISTING "COLONIALIST"
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DOCUMENT WAS UNSUITABLE AT THE PRESENT JUNCTURE IN VIEW
OF GUYANA'S DESIRE FOR A RAPID EVOLUTION TO SOCIALISM.
A POINT THAT HE MADE WITH SOME VIGOR IN HIS REMARKS
WAS THAT THE "ENTRENCHED RIGHT TO OWN EXPLOITATIVE
PROPERTY" IN THE EXISTING CONSTITUTION WOULD BE ELIMI-
NATED. IN ITS STEAD THE RIGHT TO OWN PERSONAL PROPERTY
SUCH AS A PRIVATE DWELLING OR LAND THAT WAS ACTUALLY
TILLED BY THE OWNER WOULD BE ENTRENCHED. BURNHAM DID
NOT DEFINE WHAT WAS MEANT BY EXPLOITATIVE PRIVATE PROPERTY,
BUT PRESUMABLY THIS COULD INCLUDE THE LANDHOLDINGS OF
LARGE FARMERS AS WELL AS FOREST HOLDINGS AND COMMERCIAL
AND INDUSTRIAL PROPERTY.

6. WHEN ASKED WHEN THE REFERENDUM WAS LIKELY TO TAKE
PLACE (ACCORDING TO EXISTING CONSTITUTION IT MUST BE HELD
NO EARLIER THAN TWO MONTHS AND NO LATER THAN SIX MONTHS
AFTER PASSAGE OF THE REFERENDUM BILL, WHICH WOULD MEAN
A TIMEFRAME BETWEEN JUNE 10 AND OCTOBER 9, BURNHAM
REPLIED THAT THE REFERENDUM WOULD BE HELD IN JULY. ONE
OF THE FINAL QUESTIONS CONCERNED THE TIMING OF ELECTIONS AND
WHETHER THEY MIGHT BE HELD THIS YEAR (UNDER THE EXISTING
CONSTITUTION, ELECTIONS FOR A NEW PARLIAMENT MUST BE
HELD BY OCTOBER 24)? BURNHAM'S REPLY WAS THAT, "IT
DEPENDS ON HOW SOON THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY CAN
COMPLETE ITS WORK, I DOUBT IF IT CAN THIS YEAR."

7. COMMENT: AS DEPARTMENT WILL HAVE SEEN FROM OUR
REPORTING, A VIGOROUS OPPOSITION TO THE CONSTITUTIONAL
REFERENDUM WHICH HAS UNITED ELEMENTS ALL ALONG THE
POLITICAL SPECTRUM DEVELOPED DURING BURNHAM'S FOUR-
NATION TRIP ABROAD. HIS REMARKS AT THE SATURDAY PRESS
CONFERENCE WERE OBVIOUSLY DESIGNED TO UNDERCUT THIS
MOUNTING CRITICISM, PARTICULARLY THE CHARGE THAT THE
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PNC WOULD RAM THROUGH ITS OWN ONE-PARTY CONSTITUTION AS
SOON AS THE REFERENDUM VOTE HAD BEEN WON. IN HIS PRESS
CONFERENCE BURNHAM WAS BY TURNS THE WISE AND WITTY
STATESMAN, THE EMBODIMENT OF SWEET REASONABLENESS AND
ACERBIC CRITIC. HIS PERFORMANCE WAS SMOOTHLY PROFESSIONAL
AND UNDOUBTEDLY HE HAS PROVIDED THE DIRECTION AND

INTELLIGENCE WHICH THE GOVERNMENT HAD BEEN LACKING IN
ITS REACTION TO MOUNTING OPPOSITION OVER THE LAST
SEVERAL WEEKS. WHEN THE CRITICS LOOK BEHIND THE
PROPOSAL FOR A CONSTITUTENT ASSEMBLY AND BEGIN ASKING
OBVIOUS QUESTIONS AS TO HOW IT WOULD WORK AND HOW LEGAL
IT MIGHT BE, THE MOMENTUM OF OPPOSITION MAY ACCELERATE
ONCE AGAIN BUT FOR THE MOMENT BURNHAM IS BACK AND IN
OBVIOUS COMMAND OF HIS GOVERNMENT.
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